‘Here’s Your Dinner, Jews’:

Yemenite-Jewish Lamentation in Israel as a Commemoration of Shame

Published in *Religion*, 44, 1, 46-71, 2014

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Abstract

A covert reason for the decline of ritual wailing among Yemenite-Jewish women in Israel is the community’s memory of its stay in Yemen as a period of ‘exile’ manifested in *dhimmi* status. According to respondents' oral history, Jewish lamentation was exploited by members of the majority Muslim population to compel Jews—mostly men—to wail in honor of Muslim dead. The article makes its main contribution by revealing this historical episode and analyzing the standing of women’s lamentation in the context of religio-political tension.

The respondents’ narrative reveals that although the wailers mitigated the humiliating effects of this spectacle, the appropriation of their community custom impaired Jewish men’s gender status and ability to perform religious differentiation. This, coupled with changes caused by their relocation to Israel, has made women’s lament the commemoration of a practice that evokes shame among members of this community, abetting its decline in the past decade.

Keywords: Arab-Jewish relations, dhimmi, gender, wailing, death rituals, immigration, religious differentiation

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Introduction

In October 2001, eight months after I began to research the lamentation (wailing) of Yemenite-Jewish women in central Israel, I decided to seek further insights on the topic by visiting a city in the south of the country that had a ‘Yemenite quarter’. In Yemen, the Jews were a geographically dispersed ethnic group; in Israel, a modern and multicultural immigrant society in its majority Jewish segment, they still are. I hoped to find more than mere traces of ‘authentic’ wailing in the community that I had reached, and I also hoped to find less resistance, relative to my respondents up to that time, to speaking about this ‘scary’ or ‘primitive’ custom. Among Yemenite Jews relative to other communities, a large number of women attended death events for the purpose of wailing, i.e., performing special lyrical songs that induce weeping and sustain a discourse, a set of beliefs, and behavior related to death and loss. Among my women informants, a crucial entrée to the community was provided by Meir, a family man of about sixty years of age who belonged to the community. This community had been the largest minority in Yemen (Eraqi Klorman, 2007) until 1948–1953, when nearly all Jews who remained in Yemen emigrated to Israel as part of the mass exodus of Jews from Arab countries.[1]

[11]Acknowledgments: research for this article was funded by the Budget and Planning Committee of the Israel Council for Higher Education, the Research Gamlielity of the University of Haifa, and the Lady Davis fellowships of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

[1] During the first half of the twentieth century, the number of Yemenite Jews was estimated at 60,000–70,000—the largest minority in Yemen (Eraqi Klorman, 2007). The operation that delivered them, and Meir, to Israel was called ‘On Eagles’ Wings’. This operation, a.k.a., “Operation Flying Carpet,” is the best known of the waves of Jewish immigration to Israel from

Meir provided me with these services, I assume, not only due to his interest in the matter but also due to my Yemenite-Jewish extraction, which gave us a common language. Meir's community, like other Yemenite-Jewish elsewhere in Israel, was noted for its solidarity. Although its 'emotion structure' (Appadurai, 1996: 199) [2] is crumbling, its members, originally from different parts of Yemen, proved to be hospitable raconteurs with Meir's help. Their knowledge pertained largely to the characteristics of women's wailing and its intercultural encounter with modernity, along with references to the original customs of the wailing culture in Yemen. Their stories also illuminated the tendency of many of the elder immigrants, aged 60–85, in this community and elsewhere, to view wailing not only as a practice that makes people cry together—thereby serving as an arena for solidarity and mutual responsibility (Gamliel, 2007a)—but also as a slice of history that deserves to be doomed to oblivion.

The significance of this stance provides a plausible complementary explanation for the decline of Yemenite-Jewish wailing in Israel. This article argues that the decline pertains to the very relocation of these Jews from Yemen to Israel. The Yemenite Jews' absorption in Israel as a modern multicultural project is a highly significant factor in the ethnographic narrative that follows.

Yemen. Notably, however, some 30,000 Yemenite Jews, one-third of the community, reached Israel in its pre-independence phase (1882–1947) and were dominant among Jews from Islamic countries who emigrated to the country in those years. This fact has associations with this group's intercultural encounter in Israel (Nini, 1988; and Gilad, 1989).

Importantly, research information on differences in the experiences of émigrés from different provinces in Yemen is unavailable; the topic is outside the bounds of this study.

[2] The Yemenite Jews' social networks are typified by strong interdependency, mutual support, trust, and solidarity (Tobi, 1999).

The study centers on the respondents' oral history, which it anchors in various documents. The narrative that follows owes its origins not to in-depth biographical interviewing but to testimonies that the respondents gave at their own initiative in open-ended interviews that focused on women's wailing. The close and trusting relations that I formed with the respondents, coupled with the lengthy time that passed since their emigration, encouraged them *post facto* to tell anecdotes and reveal attitudes that are not only novel in research but also have a confessional aspect that sheds light on a dimension in the complex relations between Jews and Arabs in Yemen. The respondents' self-initiated testimony confirms the importance of the oral-history approach in research on marginal groups, especially elderly immigrants whom conservative history has overlooked despite their ability to serve as the sole mediators between past and present (Hesse-Biber & Leavi, 2004, 3). My contention in this matter is predicated on what the recent discussion on oral history has found: that the advantage of such history lies less in its ability to uncover new (objective) facts than in its ability to deliver valuable insights on meanings that present-day respondents attribute to certain events from the past (Sarkar, 2012). Oral accounts are also important in 'allow[ing] one to capture a 'feeling' for a bygone time or context that is hard to reconstruct from traditional archives' (ibid.: 584). This feeling among the respondents is one of shame, transforming the *giving* of their testimonies into a strategy of justification for the decline of women's wailing.

My work until that juncture had dealt with sundry typical topics in Yemenite-Jewish wailing, including young people's rejection of the practice as a factor in its decline in recent years (Gamliel, 2010). Like other researchers (Aborampah, 1999; Holst-Warhaft, 1995), I tended to think that the life expectancy of wailing depended on the attitudes of the immigrants' descendants only. In other words, wailing might have endured for more than the sixty years that it did (from the time of the community's immigration to Israel) had the second-and third-generation immigrants not deemed it contrary to many of the emotion values that guide their lives.

In Israel, as in other Western countries, traditional mourning rituals are changing (Wouters, 2002). In the main, personal self-expression by participants in rituals is gaining more and more legitimacy, the innovators of rituals whose services are replacing some functions of the traditional burial society are becoming institutionalized, and greater freedom to redesign rituals is being asserted. (Examples are public eulogizing, musical performances, and recitations of poetry.) Unfortunately, this trend, in which both sexes are represented, does not 'celebrate' the customs of Israeli wailing women of Moroccan, Iraqi, Tunisian, or Yemenite origin. Consequently, the current flowering of 'alternative' models coincides with the death knell of women's wailing. Theoretically, these coterminous and clashing trends beg two questions: why has women's wailing failed to inspire 'innovators' and, especially, why is it widely believed that this traditional practice *should* be doomed to extinction? After all, wailing may also be viewed as an 'alternative' and quintessentially female practice—a performance of improvised lyrical song and a narrative that tackles the meaning of the loss and the singularity of the deceased. In some quarters of modern feminism, it is even considered a verbal art form that somewhat subverts the contents of the male canon ritual (Holst-Warhaft, 1995; Abu-Lughod, 1986, 1993). In addition, some scholars propose that wailing and lamenting are a potential answer to the modern-day emotional alienation from death and a precursor of psychotherapeutic processes for the resolution of grief (Wouters, 2002; Bauman, 1992; Haussaman, 1998; Aries, 1981). The terminal fate of women's wailing, leaving nary a conscious trace behind, is an oddity relative to the survival that appears to await other traditional texts in Israel. This raises even more pointed questions in view of the co-existence of traditional mourning rituals in contemporary settings (Heelas, 1996; Delanty, 2000; Beck et al., 2003), the discussion of types of 'revivals' and adaptations of wailing elsewhere, and the local revival of lament in Finland (Wilce, 2009; Tenhunen, 2007).

Wilce's book *Crying Shame* (2009) presents a comprehensive and integrated analysis of modern and postmodern references to women's wailing as a cultural phenomenon that is alternately

declining and undergoing a revival in societies that he visited (in Bangladesh and Finland). His insights, some based on his ethnographic experiencing of lament in Islamic Bangladesh, detect what he calls 'technologies of forgetting' (ibid.: 77) in a register that is positioned among religion, modernity, and Western emotional values. I include Yemenite-Jewish wailing in his conclusions because the young Yemenite Jews in my research perceive it as a practice of uninhibited public emotional display and because it is a 'performed weeping' (Gamliel, 2010a). As such, it clashes with patterns of change in Western mourning rituals that solidified in the middle of the twentieth century. The stifling of emotional display—gagging, one may call it—reflects values of self-restraint and a tendency to deny and repress death (Bauman, 1992; Aries, 1981), and 'alternative' rituals reflect an increase in appreciation of spontaneity, informality, emotional sincerity, and understanding of inner emotions (Bellah, 1985; Walter, 1994, 1999; Wouters, 2002). The attitudes of the young mirror these trends and reverberate conspicuously in my respondents' communities. However, in view of my findings in their broadest sense, I find in them partial explanation for the decline of Yemenite-Jewish wailing.

Yemenite-Jewish wailing *also* has specific characteristics that abet the defeat of its continuity. As mentioned, they pertain to the very relocation of these Jews from Yemen, where they had lived in exile, to Israel, the national home of Jews everywhere. I will show that Yemenite-Jewish women's wailing is a prism through which the cultural confrontation between Jews and Arabs in Yemen and in Israel should be contemplated.

Importantly, in the narrative I present below, the Jews of Yemen responded to what they perceived as humiliation applied by the Arabs. This unique narrative makes an important contribution to the literature on mourning cultures that include power and gender relations by exposing an extraordinary religio-political phenomenon: Jewish men being forced to wail like women over the dead of their Arab protectors.

Notably, however, there is another narrative in which the Jewish men are described as enjoying amiable relations with the Arabs. One explanation for the divergent narratives is different life circumstances in different provinces of Yemen and an advantage in political and juridical status for Jews in villages relative to those in in cities. In the former locations, they were considered clients worthy of their patrons' protection and respect. The Arab tribespeople in the villages tended to form trusting, good-neighborly, and even familial relations with them. Arabs and Jews shared complex and intimate beliefs in highly influential magical forces, in what pertains, for example, to demons and the Jewish devotional literature (Eraqi-Klorman, 2011). Furthermore, there is evidence demonstrating such harmonic coexistence that Jews and Arabs participated in each others' joys and sorrows, weddings and mourning events, and Arabs wanted the Jews to pray for the ascendancy of their deceased's souls or to fast at times of crisis, believing in their sanctity (Eraqi-Klorman, 2006). Still, the following narrative is less reflective of experiences in different provinces than of a contrasting and generalizing perspective that took shape among at least some Yemenite Jews long after their emigration to Israel. As will be described, this narrative does not totally rule out relations of respect and understanding between Jews and Arabs; it stresses the importance of preserving a status quo.

The 'Arab-ness' of the Yemenite Jews

Israel's immigrants fall into two major aggregates—*Mizrahim* (Jews who immigrated to Israel from Muslim countries such as Yemen, Morocco, and Iraq) and *Ashkenazim* (Jews of European or American origin). These groups are perceived as having clashing relationships with modernity (Ya'ar and Shavit, 2001; Ben-Rafael and Sharot, 1991). The values of the Protestant ethic, individualism, and self-control are usually attributed to Ashkenazim, whereas the traditional values of family, community life, religiosity, and mystical beliefs are associated with Mizrahim (Ya'ar and

Shavit, 2001). In the country's first few decades, Jewish ethnicity was downplayed in favor of the creation of a homogeneous Israeli melting pot. In actuality, this meant that the outlooks of the dominant—Ashkenazi—group determined the identity and basic value consensus of the population at large (Ben-Rafael and Sharot, 1991; Smooha, 1993). As the nation-building effort went ahead,

Israeli society labels Yemenite Jews as traditional, emotional, and folkloristic (Gilad, 1989). Scholars have noted the preservation of the traditional Yemenite-Jewish heritage in music and dance and even the partial adoption of this heritage by Ashkenazim over the years (Regev, 2000; Ben-Rafael, 1996). Yemenite-Jewish wailing, however, remained apart and was not assimilated into the Israeli 'culture of bereavement' that developed around, say, the collective commemoration of fallen soldiers (Rubin et al., 1999; Sivan, 1991; Palgi and Durban. 1995; Witztum and Malkinson. 1993). The nationalization of mourning for the latter entails, among other things, the recitation of the Kaddish doxology, Psalms, and biblical laments from daises or stages at annual memorial observances. Women's wailing is excluded from this practice, even in an artistic reworking. It is also absent from the trenchant public debate that has developed in recent years about the social and political implications of the demonstration of emotions in the public domain by relatives of fallen soldiers and soldiers who bemoan the loss of comrades-in-arms (Gellan, 1990; Witztum, 2004; Bilu & Witztum, 2000; see also discussion in Holst-Warhaft, 2000).

Yemenite-Jewish wailing, like other forms of lament among Mizrahi women, is strongly labeled in Israel as Muslim, emotionally uninhibited, and melancholy in its effect (Gamliel, 2010). The text that follows, written by an European Jewish scholar, reflects this perception:

> In eastern or Islamic cultures, the intensity of mourning is gauged by the extent of screaming and shouting or the intensity of the lamentations that are wailed at the funeral […]. Tolerance of the various customs is needed because sometimes it seems to us that others behave strangely and shockingly relative to the manner

> that we accept, and this may even evoke negative responses (Witztum, 2004: 21–23).

The question of the cultural identity of Arab-Jewish women's wailing is central to our discussion. The stance on this matter taken by my women respondents clashes with the discourse quoted above and differs from the view expressed by the men in my study.

Mazal, an expert wailer in Meir's community, said: 'It was a glorious culture. What values! Even the Arab women wail. But the Jews [wail] more. Emotion runs deep in a Jewish woman's heart […] those holy mothers. We respected each other a lot but each of us kept her own faith'. By and large, this discourse was typical only of émigrée wailers and women, who wished to define wailing as a religious task (Gamliel, 2010). The men, believing that women should be excused from most of religious life—regular study of religious texts and the observance of many precepts—did not share this view.

The 'Fatma story', retold below, concerns the tragic fate of a young Arab woman that inspired wailing among Jewish women. It suggests that Yemenite-Jewish women's lamentation has Arab sources, in which case it would refute both the Jewish women wailers' attitude and the stereotypes that have been linked to it. In other words, it would demonstrate the delicate linkage between Yemenite-Jewish wailing and Arab culture and the importance of language in determining its identity. This backdrop clarifies how this eminently Jewish wailing practice 'became' a non-Jewish one as Yemenite Jewry went about its assimilation in Israel.

When the Jews left Yemen, they did not leave the Middle East. Israel, of course, is surrounded by Muslim societies and has a Muslim society of its own. What this means is that various aspects of the cultural tension between Jews and Arabs in Yemen remained relevant for the Yemenite Jews' ethnic identity. Indeed, it is significant that the symbolic content of wailing attributes the practice to 'Arab-ness'. Most Yemenite Jews in Israel managed to liberate themselves of Arab-ness in the national sense, but the persistence of their cultural Arab-ness forced the community to struggle for

ethnic differentiation long after its emigration. Many immigrants from Yemen, like those from other Muslim countries, 'Hebraized' first and family names that 'sounded Arab' or meant something in Arabic and, raised their children to speak Hebrew, adopted right-wing political views (Peres and Ben-Rafael, 2006), gradually adopted Western lifestyles, and of course, refrained from transmitting the wailing practice to posterity.

Their eagerness to differentiate as Jews also found ironic expression when they decried secular permissiveness in Israel while praising the life of religion, morality, and respect that they attributed to the Muslims whom they had known. David Ben-Gurion, Israel's 'founding father' and first prime minister, who was famous for his contempt of the culture of Jews from Arab countries, expressed himself on this matter as follows: 'We don't want Israelis to become Arabs. It's our duty to resist the spirit of the Levant, which corrupts individuals and societies, and to preserve the authentic Jewish values as formed in the Diaspora'.[3] Wailing is one of several cultural practices that led to the labeling of Yemenite Jews as 'Jews' in Yemen and as 'Yemenites' in Israel. The same dialectic has been applied (*mutatis mutandis*) to Jews from other Arab countries—'Moroccans', 'Tunisians', and so on (Shohat, 2001; Shenhav, 2003). This convinced me that to understand the decline of Yemenite-Jewish wailing, one needs to set the practice within the framework of the emphasis on Arab identity that gave rise to the multicultural structuring of Israel's Jewish society.

Remembering the exile

Another important factor in understanding Yemenite-Jewish wailing via its Arab contents is the community's struggle for spiritual survival in the decades preceding their emigration to Israel. For many of the émigrés, the anguish expressed in women's wailing originates not only in the loss retold in the lament—someone's death—but also in the sociopolitical circumstances that allowed

[3] Quoted from Shohat (2001: 145).

the Yemenite Arabs to use it as a mechanism of cultural control. For the Yemenite Jews, these circumstances are captured in one word, 'exile', a crucial matter on which I elaborate below.

In Meir's community, I conducted two group interviews with some forty men to probe the images and status of women's wailing in their eyes. I met them on their regular Friday get-togethers, at which they seated themselves in a circle, chewed *khat*, and smoked hookahs.[4] Shlomo, one of the elders, said, 'I don't think you ought to look into things like these [laments]. I think there's no need for it. It does no one any good'. As the men debated this, another respondent stated that the right time to talk about lamentations is the Ninth of Av (the day when the Jews commemorate the destruction of the Temple) and not Purim (when the Jews mark their rescue from their oppressors)—the time of year when the interview took place. Since both dates in Jewish tradition abound with symbols of exile and redemption, one could easily understand why women's wailing reminded the men of destruction. Their attitudes showed me that wailing creates a 'collective in exile' situation, not only in the metaphorical sense of shared situational weeping (Seremetakis, 1990) but literally as well, by dredging up very real memories of the exile as it had occurred.

The main section of the ethnography, which describes wailing by Jewish men at Arabs' death events, sheds light on the power of the sound and sight of Yemenite-Jewish women's performance to convey a symbolic message that reminds the Jews of the political inferiority that characterized their lives in Yemen. They remember how Arabs in Yemen expected them to wail—a 'death work' that the Arabs themselves held in contempt. Therefore, I contend that wailing, in the ears of many Yemenite Jews in Israel, is also an act of 'crying shame' (Wilce, 2009). In their view, the

[4] This practice was and remains a hallmark of male culture in Yemen (Weir, 1985). It was presumably via Arab influence that the Jews of Yemen replicated this pattern in Israel due to the salutary narcotic effects of the *khat* herb and the connection between chewing it collectively, amid an exchange of religious observations, and their religious identity.

confrontation that it creates is less with modernity and 'progress' (insofar as the young typically see it this way) than with the sense of inferiority that the community elders retain from their era of life among Muslims.[5]

The stories that my fieldwork yielded allow us to focus on gender and intercultural relations in death rituals in Yemen in a way that stresses the uniqueness of the decline of Yemenite-Jewish women's wailing. The ethnography, which is my constructed narrative from the data, will highlight the contents of the respondents' narrative that eroded the community's need for nostalgia and left no chance for its rebirth. I will also discuss the narratives in reference to the findings and additional documents.

The first section describes similarities and differences in the mourning work of Jews and Arabs, including women's wailing as an exclusively Jewish practice. It also demonstrates the inferior status of women's wailing in the religious mourning work of the Jews of Yemen, against the background of the community's firm religious separatism amid its Muslim surroundings. The next section, 'The Fatma Story', provides an important explanation of this status of women's wailing—which, as stated, attests to the deep roots of Jewish wailing in Arab cultural soil. Farther on, we read stories about Jews wailing for Arabs—a memory that the erstwhile Jews of Yemen would like to forget—as Arabs appropriated the wailing of Jewish women to honor their dead and family members.

[5] My interpretation here approximates Wilce's. The shame on which Wilce focuses "involves negative representations of group character, states or actions—representations that hinge on binaries like 'modern/backward', 'modern/primitive', 'civilized/savage'. These are charged versions of the contrast between modernity and tradition" (Wilce, 2009: 120).

Jewish and Muslim work of mourning in Yemen

The research literature generally describes Yemenite Jewry as a community that for centuries maintained a stringently religious way of life, adhered to its Torah, and sustained its distinctiveness despite being subjugated to an Arab regime (Eraqi Klorman, 2007; Nini, 1988).

Tamar, aged 85, divulged her firmly held attitudes in fluent Hebrew. I viewed her as the epitome of an elderly religious woman, and present her remarks as representative of the views of most the immigrants with whom I spoke. In our conversations, she portrayed the Yemenite-Jewish culture as an ideal and differentiated one. 'We were three villages [of Jews] in our district [in Yemen]. We didn't mingle with the Arabs. Their wedding was theirs; you wouldn't see a single Jewish woman there. And our wedding was ours; you wouldn't see a single Arab woman'. The respondents' accounts of cultural differentiation related mostly to religious rituals and events but sometimes segued into practices and beliefs in various areas of daily life. Immigrants from different parts of Yemen repeated this description even though relations with the Arabs varied from district to district and were judged as anywhere from 'difficult' to 'tolerable' or even 'good'. Even though Arab folk motifs are intertwined in Jewish women's laments, the conclusion to draw from this one-dimensional narrative is that if it held sway among the Jewish communities at all, one cannot assess its significance as something detached from the Jewish heritage.[6] Although deemed inferior by the community to male religious observances, women's wailing was numbered among the community's mourning practices.

Jewish women's wailing took place within the religious bounds of the *shiva',* which assigned it a specific time and space. According to *halakha* (rabbinical law), one 'sits *shiva''* (shiva' meaning seven, i.e., seven days) following the death of a first-degree relative and accepts an array of restrictions that apply to the role of 'mourners' during this time. The custom among Yemenite Jews

[6] Analysis of Jewish women's singing in Yemen reinforces this statement (Sulami, 1995).

is for the bereaved to sit on the floor and eschew all productive labors and some personal needs.[7] Everyone involved, including wailers, avoids black clothing on the grounds that this is a 'Gentile custom'. They spend most of their time seated on mattresses, men and women separately. When prayer services are called, male mourners pray with the consolers and women mourners listen to the prayers and participate in them by saying 'Amen'. All mourners are expected to listen to *divrei Torah* (brief sermons on Torah themes) and homiletic addresses by rabbis. Relatives who are not among the bereaved serve the bereaved their meals and meet all their immediate needs. Mourners are duty-bound to 'accept consolation' throughout the shiva', i.e., to nod and say 'amen' when others approach them with a common expression of consolation on their lips: *tenuhamu min ha-shamayim* ('May you find solace from heaven'). This exchange recurs dozens of times every day as the community flocks to the home to console the bereaved and take part in prayer services and meals (Kappah, 2002).

These mourning practices and those of the Arabs of Yemen are similar in part. The similarity pertains to the apportionment of the mourning period (the intervals of three and thirty days are meaningful for both groups, for example), compulsory consolation by acquaintances of the grieving family, the community's responsibility for keeping the mourners and the consolers fed, restrictions on mourners in terms of hygiene and embellishments of dress, compulsory seating on mattresses and avoidance of entertainment (e.g., watching television), and the importance of men's prayer and devotional study for the ascendancy of the deceased's soul to heaven. As for expressing grief, mourners are allowed to weep in public only for two days after the death, during the first formal gathering known as the *thalith*. Meleney's ethnography (1996) also highlights a product of the

[7] They are enjoined against bathing and all other forms of grooming, including trimming fingernails and shaving. Source: *Ner Hashem nishmat adam* (Tel Aviv: Agudat Ahim), a manual of the rabbinical laws and worship practices of the Jews of Yemen.

limits imposed on the weeping: "[S]ome women seem harshly unsympathetic, hissing, 'forbidden!' [*Haram, haram*!] or 'God forgive this blasphemy!' [*Istaghfar Allah*]."[8]."

In contrast to the stifling role played by Arab women, Jewish women encourage weeping within permissible boundaries. The first three days of the shiva' are considered the 'days of weeping'. The prayerbook explains: 'Three days [are] for weeping, seven are for eulogy, and thirty are for [refraining from] ironing and haircutting'.[9] From the time of the death to the seventh day, the men mention the deceased by inserting eulogistic and memorial passages into their prayer services. They enunciate these textual passages in biblical Hebrew, using a special trope and rhythms that establish a climate of spiritual melancholy. The religious narrative of the common fate that awaits all human beings strengthens moralistic adherence to the text, which demands control of lachrymose manifestations and the stifling of tears. My respondents defined the men's role as that of 'learners' who go about this learning for an especially critical and sanctified purpose: 'elevating

[8]Mundy's (1995) and Meneley's ethnographies (1996) suggest a limited similarity between the *muzayyināt* (expert crooners for weddings) and Jewish women wailers. Both groups of women are responsible for preparing bodies for burial and encouraging the community to support the aggrieved. In verbal coping with grief, however, their roles differ. The *muzayyinā,* like other elderly Arab women, supervise women's weeping (as distinct from wailing) to ensure that it not get out of control or transgress the boundaries of modesty as modeled by the men; they prefer to listen to the paid specialist, the *nashshādah,* who is expected to recite religious verses. The *nashshādah* is the closest of all to the Jewish wailer, but she operates within the bounds of the Muslim faith, which forbids the expression of grief emotions, largely due to fear of challenging God's will (Halevi, 2004). This injunction is reinforced in three ways: the discouraging parallel that the women draw among grief, anger, and illness; the women's belief that weeping afflicts the deceased's soul; and the sharing of moving personal narratives about loved ones *outside* the formal mourning sessions.

[9] Source: *'Ilui Neshamot* Prayerbook, following the Yemenite-Jewish rite.

the soul of the deceased [to heaven]'. Men's lamentation treats the death event as a object lesson that requires those among the 'congregation of the living' to reflect on moral teachings and addresses the salvation of the soul. An excerpt from a standard phrasing follows:

> May the King, King of kings, shelter in His mercy [the soul of the deceased] in the recesses of His abode and under the shade of His wings. May [the deceased] merit the witnessing of God's pleasantness and may he visit His sanctuary. In the end of days, may [God] bring him to his feet, invite him to life in the hereafter, and bind his soul with the souls of the living. May peace be his escort. And may he come to his place of rest safely.

The expression 'three days [are] for weeping' establishes a religious sanction for limited mourning work by women. In Yemen, women (Jewish and Arab) were enjoined against entering the cemetery by rules of modesty and ritual purity. Instead of entering, they remained at the home of the deceased, seated themselves in a separate guest room called a *diwan*, and, per the custom in most parts of Yemen, wailed in a circle. The lament was chanted in the Yemenite Arabic vernacular, which the wailers elevated by several registers to a liturgical means of communication that they used to express existential content. Invoking metaphors from nature, the lament described the deceased's persona and the anguish occasioned by his demise—an anguish that the wailer had experienced personally and as a member of the community. In districts of Yemen where the women did not form a circle, Jews hired the services of an expert Jewish woman wailer (Gamliel, 2010b). Her work of mourning, expressly meant to induce weeping, was considered a social gesture in a devotional community. A Yemenite-Jewish saying confirmed this: 'A groom is honored by singing, the dead are honored by wailing'.

The following lyrics, recited by an elderly woman respondent, provide an example of Yemenite-Jewish women's lament. The object of the lament was her son, who had succumbed to a

serious illness at the age of forty. The poem expresses her loneliness and her agonized nostalgia for the deceased.

> How did you leave home? / [The house] will be sealed now that you've gone. / God, may He take the elderly. / If only I had gone to the grave. / If only I were a maggot in the ground. / Father and Mother, / if only I had someone to tell the story to, / if only he were alive; if only he'd knock on the door. / The wind knocks on every door; / take my letter / to my son, who has departed, / and bring me a reply. / He went to the grave / without saying goodbye./ If only I were a maggot / That would go into his grave / And I'll think of him / that he will return to life. / He cannot rise / he's already covered by a mound of stones.

Comparison of women's wailing with Jewish men's eulogy shows that the former is built on material from the past; it expresses in gossamer strands 'what once was and is no more', whereas men's wailing sets the details of the events in the present, immediately after the death event, and extends the setting to the future that awaits the deceased's soul. Women's wailing deals with individuals whose corporeal nature has been revealed, whereas men's wailing almost totally disregards this aspect of being and transforms the uniqueness of the individual into an abstract soul that lacks identity. In other words, the official, male-controlled death ritual routes the collective consciousness along linear lines of transitivity that lead to a future or to timelessness. The wailing of women, in contrast, tunnels through the events of the past cyclically and amplifies the crisis that the present has generated due to familiarity with a specific person. The more the contents of the wailing texts are arrayed around the metaphysical and the physical, the more the male bonds with the transitional function of death rituals and the female bonds with the crisis function (Chidester, 1990).

In the men's devotional labors, the religious calendar of Yemenite Jewry included various manifestations of mourning or sorrow apart from death events—daily recitation of Psalms, the *selihot* service during the month preceding Yom Kippur, and the recitation of the Scroll of Lamentations and a series of dirges on the Ninth of Av (the anniversary of the destruction of the Temple), among others. The men's religious exertions were melancholy in greater part, responding to the hardships of exile and yearning for redemption and return to the Land of Israel. The Jews of Yemen considered themselves God's children who poured out their entreaties to Him as they languished in a foreign land. Their sense of existential insecurity in the present was nourished by the collective memory of difficulties in Yemen (Tobi, 1984; Parfitt, 1996). 'In Yemen, there was a problem of exile and poverty', said Yitzhak, a member of Meir's community. 'One [of the men] was unique. He was the talk of the town. When they prayed, they wanted to hear him. I remember him. To this day I'm moved. When he opened his mouth, you had so much emotion, you wept so much, that you felt you were in heaven'. The anguish of exile and the craving for redemption found its ultimate expression in the poetry of Yemenite Jewry's greatest bard, R. Shalom Shabazi (1619–1700) (Tzadok, 1983)—a poetry vastly different from that of Muslim men (Caton, 1990). Even though this poetry was recited on happy occasions—the Sabbath and festivals--most of it was delivered in a melancholy singsong. Typical lyrics follow: 'It's the day of remembrance of Zion and my heart pounds / I call out to God Supreme, my Rock: observe my wretchedness'. Shalom Shabazi also wrote lamentations alluding to violent attacks that the Jews of Yemen had experienced, e.g., the destruction of the Jewish quarter of Sana'a by the Muslims: 'Surely my eye weeps at night for the people of Sana'a, my tears flow, the honorable were dishonored in their homes' (Tzadok, 1983: 65).

Although women's wailing at death events was part of the Yemenite-Jewish discourse of melancholy, it did not share the national aspects and the metaphysical religious meaning of the men's work, which was enunciated only in Hebrew, the holy tongue. These deficiencies of

women's wailing abetted the inferior status of the practice in the community, a status confirmed by men and women and even the wailers themselves. When I asked Zahara, an expert wailer, why she considered men's recitation of Psalms at death events more important than women's wailing, she replied, 'Women weep for the dead but the dead won't return. Prayer is meant to elevate the soul. Prayer is more important for sure'. Below I explain the background of the perception of wailing among Israel's Yemenite-Jewish immigrants as something inextricably linked to exile and their willingness to forsake its continuity in Israel, considering it 'just a custom, not a ritual'.

The 'Fatma story'

Johara, who died about thirty years ago in Meir's community, was a mythical wailer—the revered 'mother of wailers', a towering expert in the management of an audience's emotions. Her powerful wailing, my respondents assured me, could *beki a-tiur*—make the birds cry. Whenever she reached a house of mourning in Israel, the rabbi himself would stop in mid-sermon as a gesture of respect. Given her exceptional status and immense social influence, Fatma's story is quite valuable; its significance lies in what it contributes to our understanding of the place of Arab motifs in Yemenite-Jewish wailing:

'My mother could tell the story several times a month', said Johara's son. 'She'd wail to us after saying, "I'll tell you a story that happened in Yemen."' The son then segued to a thrilling, elaborate narrative associated with Johara that shaped the mental work behind her wailing and that of other women. For purposes of the presentation that follows, the text is as unedited as possible and preserves the order of events and the picturesque impression that the narrator conveyed.

> Once there was an ordinary family that had two parents and three children. The parents and two of the children died, leaving one boy. The uncle pitied his nephew and took him into his home. The orphan grew up with his uncle's children and was like a brother to them. One of the uncle's daughters was Fatma,

a cute little girl. When the children grew up, the uncle decided that his adoptive nephew should marry his daughter, Fatma. Fatma loved her cousin dearly but in the manner of a sister, and she couldn't imagine ever becoming his wife. Her father set the date of the wedding and attended to all the details and arrangements. Her mother hired a girl to meet all of Fatma's needs ahead of her wedding. As the wedding day approached, Fatma became anxious. Her father had not consulted her and she knew she could not persuade him to reconsider.

In her distress, Fatma decided to run away. In the middle of the night, she climbed out of bed, got dressed, and left. From her parents' home, which was on the main road, Fatma saw a passing caravan being driven by black men who looked like slaves. The beautiful Fatma ran toward them and asked, 'Which of you would like to marry me?' The head of the convoy, who alone had the right to answer, stared at her and said, 'I would'. She told him, 'The price you'll pay my father is such as such'. Hearing this, he immediately produced the specified amount, handed it to her, and said, 'Please take it'. Fatma took the money and ran to her parents' home. Silently she placed the money on the windowsill of her father's room and added a handwritten note: 'Father, I'm sorry but I cannot marry someone who's a brother to me. Here is my husband's payment to you. You lack nothing; I've gone away'.

Fatma's mother woke up in the morning and found the money and the note in her daughter's handwriting. Realizing at once that her daughter Fatma had eloped with an African, she felt an immense sadness. 'Fatma', she said in anguish, 'What will I tell your father? What will people say about us? What gossip will be said in the street?' and other sundry unanswerable questions. Thus Fatma's mother gave her father the bad news about her daughter's eloping. Realizing

> what had happened, he also began to sing a sad song but insisted that he did not believe his dear Fatma had left. As he sang, he became angry and wished his daughter never to have a grand wedding and never to have children. The intended groom heard what Fatma's father had said and trembled. He loved Fatma with his every fiber and considered her the wife of his youth. Then he, too, burst into melancholy song: 'Fatma, I bought you a red kerchief. I bought it for you and someone else is wearing it. Fatma, you are the beautiful flower that I raised, and someone else has come and plucked it'.
>
> The caravan, with Fatma now aboard, moved ahead slowly. The rearguard with his camel stopped at the edge of town to buy some more supplies for the lengthy trip. Word of Fatma's elopement had already spread through town. People repeated the lachrymose songs that her parents and her groom-designate had recited. The rearguard now caught up with the caravan and reported the contents of the anguished lamentation to Fatma and the men. This saddened Fatma greatly, since she loved her parents. As she heard the lyrics of her cousin's song, her love for him, the champion of her youth, reawakened. Then an immense sadness overtook her, for her act was irrevocable; she had already been sold to a stranger. She sang the misery, the sorrow, and the regret that now filled her heart. In her song, she said that her days were numbered and that she wished to be buried on the main road. When she concluded her ode of anguish, she plunged from the camel's back to her death.

This tale, like the lamentations themselves, was evidently part of an oral transmission (Finnegan, 2001). I found a correspondence between it and the character of the Arab heroine as reflected in song, in legend, and in history (Nicholson, 1942). Nicholson quotes the story of

'another' Fatma, Fatma the daughter of Kharshev, dating to Arab antiquity.[10] Although the plot is different, the motifs in the story presented above and those in the narrative documented by Nicholson are remarkably similar:

> Fatma daughter of Kharshev was one of the three noble mothers who were coronated as […] the mothers of the heroes. She had seven sons […]. One day, Kamel Badr of Pizhar attacked Bani Abbas, Fatma's tribe, and took her captive. When he drove away the camel on which she had been riding, she cried, 'Son of man, your capacity for understanding has gone into hiding. By the life of God, if you take me captive and if we leave behind the hillock that is before us, there will never be peace between you and Bani Zayad [the sons of Zayad, Zayad being her husband's name], because people will speak as they wish. Even an undifferentiated bad suspicion will suffice'. 'I will lead you', he said, 'so that you will let my camel graze'. Realizing that she was his captive, Fatma threw herself off the camel and died. Thus she perished lest she bring shame upon her offspring (Nicholson, 1942: 76–77).

In both stories, tragedy befalls a noble woman named Fatma, who prefers death and throws herself off a camel to spare her family from disgrace. The stories fit into the conceptual framework of the songs of Muslim tribes in Arab countries. The traditional song of these tribes expresses a discourse of vulnerability, melancholy, and self-pity, generally accompanied by love and betrayal (Wilce, 1998; Grima, 1991; Abu-Lughod, 1986). In my judgment, this story, like other works of folklore, has adopted and changed forms over the years, metamorphosed into the 'Fatma story' that was current in Johara's surroundings, and was appropriated by additional Jewish wailers (Ben-Amos, 1973). I support this inference by noting the degree of cultural similarity that exists between

[10] Fifth century C.E.

the singing of Yemenite-Jewish women and that of their ‘neighbors’ in Egypt, the women of the Awlad ‘Ali Bedouin tribe (Abu-Lughod, 1986). The similarities appear at various levels of performance. Both groups of women, for example, use similar words to denote singing (*ghinnawas)* and wailing (or ‘weeping’—*bka*) and assign similar meaning to both creative forms. In both groups, wailing is partly improvised and structurally and technically parallel to singing. Even though women’s lament in Yemen left no room for emotions of anger, it expressed sadness much as the Bedouin women’s wailing does and it relates similarly to how the loss of a loved one affects the personal welfare of the wailer and other relatives.

The story, with its tacit Arab motifs, was an integral part of the practice of imparting expertise. Johara’s son retold it as though it belonged to a dismal ‘musical’ in which four characters—mother, father, man, and woman—express themselves in lyrical song. There are reasonable grounds to affirm Johara’s son’s supposition that it was a standard text that Jewish wailers pronounced away from places of mourning in order to ‘fit’ it to the wailing performance. The narrative style had an element of rapid transition from melody to speech and vice versa; for this reason, it challenged the emotional control that is typical of the professional wailer. The story was an instrument that might help to socialize Jewish girls in Yemen to the culture of wailing women. Even if this conclusion is valid only for some of the Yemeni districts where Jews once lived, it reinforces the hypothesis about the Arab origin of Jewish women’s wailing.

Instead of confronting this hypothesis, the men in the circle of hookah smokers cited women’s wailing as a practice of biblical provenance. They quoted from memory the prophet Jeremiah’s call for national repentance: ‘Thus says the Lord of hosts: contemplate and call for the lamenting women that they may come, and send for the skillful women that they may come. Let them come quickly and take up a wailing for us, so that tears may stream from our eyes and our eyelids gush out with waters’ (Jer. 9:16–17). These verses do attest to the existence of women’s wailing from the very dawn of Jewish history; also, however, they leave the non-binding religious status of the

practice intact (Gamliel, 2007). In fact, they reflect a consistently canonic stance according to which, in the Yemenite diaspora as well as in antiquity, acknowledgment of the affective power of women's wailing reinforced the primacy of religious goals. The test of antiquity, strengthened by the claim that a Jewish kingdom preceded Muslim rule in Yemen (Tzadok, 1983; Muchawsky-Schnapper, 2000), cannot attest to the cultural metamorphosis of women's wailing up to the beginning of the twentieth century. Additionally and primarily, it does not play a significant role in the structuring of the immigrant community's memory and images.

Jewish wailing at Arab death events

Summoning the expert dhimmi

It was via informants in Meir's community that I discovered that Jews in Yemen had to eulogize or wail in Arabs' houses of mourning. This decree was an outgrowth of their status in Yemen, which persisted even into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Jews were *dhimmi*—tolerated and protected subjects to whom discriminatory laws applied as concrete manifestations of their social, legal, and religious inferiority (Kappah, 2002; Hollander, 2005; Parfitt, 1996).[11]

Historical research, however, shows that relations between Jews and Arabs in rural areas were more akin to a client–patron model and that the Jews, bound with their patrons in an 'alliance of blood', enjoyed respect, occupational freedom, and continual protection—sometimes (in concert with other socioeconomic factors) even encouraging Jews to convert to Islam and eschew emigration to Israel. The shared and intimate way of life explains the Jews' well-known attitude toward their neighbors, captured in the statement, 'Nothing separates us except for ritual slaughtering and marriage' (Eraqi-

[11] *Dhimmis*, although protected, lacked political rights. In Yemen as in North Africa, where there were no other significant religious minorities, the term dhimmi, originally used in the *shari'a* (the legal foundation of the state) to denote non-Muslims living under Islam, became a synonym for Jews. (Eraqi Klorman, 2007; Goldberg, 1990).

Klorman, 2007, p. 108). Given this closeness and, in particular, the patrons' sense of moral obligation, sheikhs sometimes punished Muslims who insulted Jews (Eraqi-Klorman, 2011). Still, in other fields of life where patrons were less involved, the Jews' awareness of some of the discriminatory laws[12] created an ambivalent situation in which their wailing for Arabs was not only an act of outreach and respect but also a demonstrative act rooted in fear.

Arabs considered eulogizing and wailing for the dead demeaning practices that they added to the list of vocations that were reserved solely for Jews (Tzadok, 1983). Hannah explained, 'The Arabs didn't want to get off their high horse and wail for the dead, but the Jews were experts in eulogizing and wailing for the dead'.

Binyamin-Gamliel, a folklore scholar and an informant in Meir's community, explains the background and, in so doing, notes the misfortune that Jews experienced in some Yemenite villages: the system of protégés and protectors that forced many Jews to hide sometimes under the protective wings of sheikhs and tribal chieftains. These Jews sought this defense because they were helpless against Arab predations that were often manifested in robbery, humiliation, and physical

[12] These laws forbade Jews to build homes to higher elevations than Muslims' homes, raising their voices while reading the Torah, riding horses or donkeys within city limits, etc. A Jew who encountered a Muslim had to greet him with the expression *al-salam 'aleykum* [peace be upon you—denoting respect] but the Muslim, instead of reciprocating, would say, *hamdi la-Allah* (thank God). When Muslims mentioned a Jew in conversation, they would add *khasheykum*, signifying 'beneath your dignity'. Muslims excoriated Jews for smelling bad, some explaining this as the reason for their living in separate neighborhoods (Parfitt, 1996). An especially grim corollary of the dhimmi status was the 'orphans decree', the forced conversion to Islam of every Jewish orphan (Eraqi Klorman, 2001); another was an edict that required Jews to clean cesspools and collect Arabs' feces (Kappah, 2002; Tobi, 1984).

violence. In the reciprocal relationship that came about, it was the Jewish protégé's duty to set up the sheikh's working tools and mend his clothing (Binyamin-Gamliel, 1966). This was consistent with the customary division of labor in many parts of Yemen, in which only Arabs were allowed to work the land while Jews were confined to occupations such as metal and silver smithing, pottery, weaving, and the like (Parfitt, 1996). Binyamin-Gamliel adds, 'The jewel in the crown of these terms of protection was the eulogy that the Jews had to deliver for the sheikh after his death' (Parfitt, 1996: 65). The Jewish eulogizers, my respondents told me, were men; Jewish women also had to appear at Arab death events as wailers, although such cases were relatively few. Rahel, Johara's neighbor, described one of these instances: 'They told me, "You have to go and wail for them."' There had been a serious incident, in which two young men were killed. The Arabs' request for Rahel's services as a wailer in their home was addressed to her relatives. Although it reflected good neighborly relations and sincere commiseration, it was obviously one that could not be refused.

The value that the Arabs attributed to eulogy and wailing service traces to the significance of lyrical texts for honoring the dead, as their own wailing cultures affirm. Indeed, my respondents noted that Yemenite-Arab women also raised their voices in lament on occasion. By summoning their Jewish subjects, devout Arabs could obey the Islamic injunction against women's wailing by those of their confession (Halevi, 2004)[13] and pass on the task of *bka* mainly to Jewish men. As the very devout adherents of an Abrahamic faith, Jewish men were considered 'semi-Muslims' and people whose eulogies would surely cause no offense to Muslim religious values. The Arabs also appreciated the Jews' prowess in making tears flow. Their performances were considered ideal and very glorifying. Yosef, Rahel's husband, related, 'The Arabs didn't know how to wail so well. With

[13] This also appears in Wilce (2009: 90). Islam forbids women's wailing due to beliefs related to challenging God's will, obstructing the transmigration of the soul to the hereafter, and performative modesty (El-Cheikh, 2003).

the Jews, it was really, really something […] They'd come to the Jews to hear it'. When I asked where the Jews had acquired their advantage in wailing, Miriam, Meir's mother, opined that they were the only literate people in the rural areas of Yemen and understood the advantage that this gave them: 'It's because they know Torah'.

The scarcity of Jewish women wailers in Arab homes is explained by noting the Arabs' license to obtain services from Jews that they were not allowed to provide on their own.[14] The value of honor, an important one in this society and a definitive factor in death events, was manifested in the demand for respect of the deceased and his family. 'When a Jewish man came to wail for an Arab', Leah, an expert wailer, recounted, 'it would elevate the Arab, his neighborhood, and his surroundings'. In exceptional cases where the Arabs settled for the wailing of Jewish women, they sometimes translated the value of respect into special treatment of some of the women involved. Haviva, a woman whom I met in a community center, described having been chaperoned to the Arab mourners' house so that she could wail: 'This Arab would take me from my father's home. He'd come and go and come and go, waiting for me'. That she was escorted does more than attest to the imperative of maintaining the distance of modesty. It also embodies a show of exceptional patience on the chaperone's part toward his client.

'Here's your dinner, Jews'

In the buildup to the emigration of Meir's community from Yemen, there was no severe or protracted famine of the kind that the country had endured in the nineteenth century (Eraqi Klorman, 2007). Even so, Jews were largely less well off than Arabs, partly due to the dhimmi

[14] Similar to the Jewish approach toward the *Shabbes goy*.

status that precluded their engaging in agriculture.[15] In certain districts, Jewish families often needed charity from members of their community and the kindnesses of good-hearted Arabs. Arabs' death events created propitious opportunities for the latter. True to their views on honor, the Arabs felt duty-bound to reward wailers generously for their services and, accordingly, transformed death events into opportunities for Jews to obtain food at times of distress.

'In Yemen, if an Arab died, five or six Jewish men went over to wail for him', my uncle Zechariah related, adding, 'The moment [the Arabs] buried [their dead], the Jews would come out with two sheep's heads because they'd gone over to wail. I myself experienced this three times. My father took me with him even though I was still a boy'. 'The Jews would walk over as if to wail for a dead Arab', Shlomo, Meir's brother, noted. 'But why?' he asked, then answering: 'to get a heifer or a sheep'.

In this case, as in rural Greece (Danforth, 1982; Holst-Warhaft, 1995), the expectation of food was explicit. It resembles most closely the way women in Artas, an Arab village south of Bethlehem, put their wailing to use. Granqvist describes these women as moving together from one mourners' house to another and expecting gastronomic rewards for their compassionate lamentations. They were overheard singing, 'Were it not for the sausages and the (black) bread, we would not have come to shake our head!' (1965: 95).

The Jews realized that the imperative of giving respect might subject 'an Arab house that did not reward the wailers with food [to] shame and disgrace', one of the informants recounted. The Arabs mirrored this realization with undisguised pride, saying 'Here's your dinner, Jews'. The Jews exploited this compulsory respect and made it the topic of demands within the lamentation text. Many of my respondents knew the story of the poor Jewish widow who had to wail at the home of Arabs in order to keep her children. One respondent related:

[15] The historian Eraqi Klorman connects the Jews' economic situation in Yemen with the acceptance of Islam among a few of them (2007).

> One widow saw that a funeral was taking place and she went because the Arabs make food at a funeral and eat there, in the cemetery, after they bury their dead. The woman had to feed her sons and daughters. She came and saw that there was plenty of food, *harish* and *saman*.[16] She wanted to go over and eat. But then she had this feeling: how could she eat her fill while her children were starving, starving to death, at home? What would she gain from that?! What kind of pleasure would that be?! She'd gorge herself and her children would go hungry?! She began to weep [wail] as if she were weeping for the deceased. She wept her pain. She says, '*Samna wasid yesh maspiq',* If only my children get the enjoyment. If only they'll eat….

Yosef described a *faux* wailing performance that was given for the sole purpose of obtaining food, at the risk of endangering relations with an Arab neighbor. He conferred with his brother and together they told the Arab that they would soon visit him at home. The Arab, Yosef continued, invited them gladly, oblivious to the ruse that the Jewish brothers had concocted. When the two Jews arrived, they covered their faces and began loudly to bewail an offspring of the Arab family who had died two months earlier. The Arabs in the house were amazed by the belated gesture. "Why are you wailing?" the bewildered Arab continued as he headed to the kitchen to prepare several dishes for Yosef and his brother, as if for lack of choice.

Spiritual distress

The Jews' ability to convert their expertise into a source of livelihood did nothing to alleviate the indignity having to wail in Arabs' homes. The nature of the relationship created by the Jews'

[16] Nourishing Yemenite dishes.

dhimmi status, and the messages that reminded the Jews to subjugate their wishes to those of their masters, are described by Binyamin-Gamliel (1966):

> And if one of the Gentiles' dignitaries, be it a sheikh, a rich man, or a powerful official, should die, the Jews would (but not everywhere) go and eulogize him and recount his power, and his heroism, and his generosity, even if he had been neither heroic nor generous while alive […]. Many Gentile VIPs who didn't deserve even a word of praise demanded the honor of being eulogized by Jews after their death. The deceased's survivors thought it uncommonly important to have Jews deliver a eulogy. And if the Jews did not visit them to give the eulogy, [the Arabs] considered it a grave insult to the deceased and his survivors and construed it as though the Jews held the deceased and his family in contempt and rejoiced in their anguish and loss (Binyamin-Gamliel, 1966: 65–67).

Jews wailed in response to the Arabs' demand for respect—an uncompromising demand that posed an impossible emotional challenge to its subjects. The demand for respect is an oxymoron in terms of the mechanisms of emotion: it is a self-defeating strategy because 'demand' rules out the attainment of 'respect'. Those who apply the coercion entertain the delusion that the outcome will be a positive emotion. A unique characteristic of these 'death occupations', one that intensified the challenge that the performers were supposed to withstand, is that wailing cannot be accomplished without speaking and has to be done in public. A Jew can no longer retreat into his private domain, strike a hunk of iron with a hammer, or weave thread through a piece of cloth. He has to impress an audience with his good will and perform the text that he has composed.

Had Jews refused to take part in Arabs' death events, the Arabs might have accused them of *Schadenfreude*. As dhimmi, the Jews certainly knew that the Arabs could avenge their insult. An accusation of Schadenfreude could shred the delicate fabric of neighborly relations between Jews and Arabs, with threatening if not fateful implications.

Below are lyrics from a lament that Jewish men improvised in the memory of an Arab who had died, as found and translated from Arabic into Hebrew by Binyamin-Gamliel:

> My heart inside me was bestirred / by the rumor that reached me before dawn / They said that a fortress and a lighthouse had been conquered./ May his sons and all the women praise him,/ May his cousins, straight as snakes, praise him,/ May his palace and his bedding praise him—badgers' skins / May his courts and his yards praise him,/ May his horses and riders praise him./ O he who shoots the mosquito and never misses and the fish in the water and strikes him / O hero, he of the red eye/ O broad-winged vulture' (Binyamin-Gamliel, 1966: 65–66).

Another excerpt of Jewish men's improvised lament, translated from Arabic into Hebrew by a different source, follows:

> We shall bewail you, king son of king/ renowned in all lands; / I shall lament for you, the soil will cry for you, as will all the provinces./ The crier said, Whose blood is this? /Answer, dead one, scholar of the Quran / The unnamed chivalrous one, cradle of the kingdom./ He left behind hosts of young men/ Men of war, of chariot, of horse / His sons and cousins, clever and brave (Yeshayahu and Tobi, 1976: 416–417).

'They wailed even if they hadn't known the deceased at all', Zechariah told me. Miriam added, '[They'd] say that he'd been great, that he'd been this special guy … all sorts of things'. The audience did not subject the Jews' lamentations to the test of truth; on the contrary: the more the lament abounded with praise, the more pleased the deceased's relatives were (Tzadok, 1976: 157). 'When it was over', Miriam reported, 'the Arabs would tell the Jewish wailers, "Thank you very much, you've been really okay with us. You did our family good."' As dhimmis, most of the Jews

‘didn’t grasp the sword and did not know war’. For this reason, their singing and wailing excluded these motifs.

Ratzhabi (1987–1988: 740) explains: ‘They were loyal to the reality of life’ and ‘avoided glory that was not rooted in the Jewish reality’. ‘Wailing for Arabs’, however, forced them to betray the course of this reality, which concerned itself mainly with the agony of exile, surrender, and acceptance of judgment. As he wailed, the Jew was asked to turn his back on his community’s heritage, spiritual identity, and fate, as well as the many hardships attached to them. When he mentioned the deceased’s great and abiding feats of war and combat and his erudition in the Quran, he discoursed about something that was not his and embraced a ‘Gentile custom’ that was common among Arab women wailers. By implication, the melody of his wailing might echo the woes of his community but the lyrics were estranged from it. To satisfy the vanities of the deceased’s relatives and surmount the indignity, the Jew had to estrange himself from himself.

Jewish eulogizers coped with this situation by performing a parody of the women’s wailing that they knew in their community, believing that they alone were in on the joke. The Arabs’ inability to criticize and control the performance, and the state of total dependency that obliged them to respect the performers, were translated into creative and unruly acting devices. For example,

> Jews sometimes exploited the perception of their ‘otherness’ and mystical knowledge to strengthen their positions against the Muslims by applying cunning and manipulation. They would pretend, for example, that they were forced to do an evil deed, i.e., steal crops, by a demon that had possessed them, and thus they escaped punishment. On other occasions, Jews would pretend to know how to write amulets or master the demons in order to obtain material gains from the tribesman (Eraqi-Klorman, 2011: 136).

In the wailing parody, the Jewish men put on an acting performance that warped the original form of their community's ritual by the unique device of grafting non-Jewish contents of heroism and religion, which met the Arabs' requirements, onto elements of the Jewish lament and eulogy. This parody somewhat resembled the parody on women's professional discourse at the Roman funeral that is known as *nenia.* Dutsch's analysis (2008) sheds light on subversive and mocking elements that illuminate expectations relating to the original lament (see also Karanika, 2008).

Apart from its Arabic language, the Yemenite-Jewish parody was declarative without being committed to truth in three respects: (a) it focused on a deceased person whom everyone had known; (b) it urged groups in the audience to express mourning; and (c) it listed the deceased's impressive achievements to appease the audience.

The melody of the Yemenite-Jewish parody oscillated between that of men's eulogy and that of women's lament. The eulogizers also borrowed bodily gestures from women's wailing to emphasize the anguish that the death had caused them. In stark contrast to their own customs, they pounded their chests and issued powerful cries of distress. Fearing that an unconvincing performance might expose them to vengeance and persecution, they did their best to impress the onlookers with the authenticity of their anguish over the death of their loved ones or dignitaries. Their efforts went so far as the 'lachrymose herb' story, in which Rumia, an eighty-year-old expert wailer, recalled the resourcefulness of one Jew who wailed at an Arab house of mourning. To demonstrate that he was truly and deeply saddened by the passing of the deceased, he stockpiled a reserve of fake tears in advance. Moments before circulating in the crowd, he moistened a sprig of tiny leaves of a fragrant herb known in Yemenite Arabic as *shugur.* Then he wound the sprig under his hat like a wreath and trusted the moisture to drip down his face. Whenever he wished to amplify the impression of his 'tears', he wailed louder and covered his eyes, squeezing the leaves atop his forehead.

His ruse succeeded. Indeed, as a rule, my respondents stated, the Arabs did not challenge the veneer of truth that the Jewish eulogizers created and the Jews did not challenge the Arabs' patience and sensitivity to respect. To preserve this status quo, however, the Jews paid in the coin of gender identity. The men in the circle of hookahs lectured to me about the 'fact' that, as men, they are familiar with 'women's tears'. Their attitude centered not only on the spontaneity of the women's tears but also, by allusion, on the dimension of play-acting and manipulation that they embodied.

Several remarks demonstrate this:

> 'Women, we know, are more prone to tears than men'. 'She's more sensitive and weaker by nature. You're more concerned about her. She needs more caressing, help, and compassion than men do'. 'The woman has the traits, she's got emotion, she can say things differently. She expresses pain differently, too. Not like a man. Men are stronger. It's natural; it's been that way ever since woman was created'. 'Sometimes she can be manipulative even in a court of law. When she starts to cry, the judge treats her considerately. A woman's tears are a whole different world. The emotion is built in a totally different way. Women are pitied'.

The *characteristics* of Jewish men's performance in Arabs' houses of morning were very different from their *attitudes* toward the unique sensitivity of the women in their community. The attitudes were exclusive to the intra-community arena and had no place in Arabs' houses of mourning. As a type of "knowledge," they merely served the necessity of facilitating a successful performance of women's wailing.

Discussion

For many years, women's wailing embodied the complex relations that Jews and Arabs in Yemen maintained. The foregoing narrative performs a valuable service by illuminating this unexplored segment of the history of the Yemenite Jews and explains the ultimate fate of the community's practice of women's wailing. This narrative is included in Wilce's global analysis of the decline of wailing cultures. In addition to the explanation in Wilce's analysis of the shame and the wish to forget among émigrés from Yemen, I offer two additional explanations that are anchored in the findings.

Wilce relates to the history of the foundation of nation-states as an interesting place to examine the tension between national pride and the shame that members of a subculture feel as long as they do not consider themselves representatives of the national model. This is one of the ways in which agents of modernity humiliate traditional subgroups. This humiliation, often more internalized than resisted, causes members of the group to devalue their culture as a way of leveraging cultural change and assimilating into the majority group (Wilce, 2009). The narrative in the foregoing ethnography shows that the humiliation of the Yemenite Jews is a consequence of the linkage of the Israeli hegemonic narrative—modernistic, secular, Ashkenazi—about women's wailing with the Muslim way of life. My findings—in the Fatma story and the wailing for Arabs—support this linkage. One cannot disregard the significance of findings that link both the *origin* and the *use* of Yemenite-Jewish wailing to their Arab neighbors—findings that depict Yemenite-Jewish wailing as something that emerged from the Arabs and returned to them, as if it had merely been on loan to the Jews for intercultural assimilation purposes and had never really been theirs. From this perspective, it is clear why it was mainly the men among the erstwhile Jews of Yemen who expressed rejection of women's wailing. Their rejection signified its devaluation and identification with the hegemonic

narrative that labels their ‘heritage’; it also explains why the young are not interested in reviving the practice in any variation.

A second reason for shame is that the Oriental stereotyping of wailing in Israel bases itself mainly on ‘backwardness’ (Wilce, 2009, 97-117)— on what is believed about the *origins* of the practice—while the story of the Yemenite-Jewish wailing in Arabs’ homes is not known at all. The Fatma story, which supports hypotheses about the Arab origin of Jewish wailing, gives Yemenite Jews in Israel a reason to feel shame even though it had no such effect among the Jews in Yemen, whereas the story of wailing for Arabs gives Yemenite Jews a reason to have felt shame in Yemen but not in Israel. The latter narrative, however, is a very grim piece of baggage.

Even though the economic division of labor in Yemen made the Jews so needed as to force non-Jews to depend on them, the Jews, and *a fortiori* the eulogizers, were deemed fit for shunning as a matter of status. As Jews, they were forced to lament—to perform a ritual that Arabs were not allowed to perform and that they considered contemptible. As such, the community understood the performance as a signifier of the very spiritual defilement that, at this time, qualified them to perform it. This Arab attitude toward the Jews was a cultural variation (albeit a milder one) of the dependency-ostracism situation that typifies the treatment of Untouchables in India, who hold undesirable occupations. The Untouchables are labeled and excluded because they are experts in cremating bodies and serve in some locations as gravediggers, i.e., those in charge of the most polluting and inauspicious work of death. Their untouchability also qualifies them to serve as bearers of bad tidings, as tanners, and as sweepers (Parry, 1994; Deliege, 2001).

The rationale for this explanation is the dhimmi status—and, in particular, the decrees and attitudes encountered in daily life—which demonstrated the importance of maintaining physical distance from the Jews (see note 11).

The profound ambivalence expressed in the pairing ‘inferior/valuable’ was typical of relations between the Arabs and Jews of Yemen. The former held the latter be inferior in value but admired their erudition and mystical power. Thus, the demand that the Jews perform ostensibly clashed with the habitus of respect (Patai, 1983) that required the Arabs to play the role of generous patrons. Although neighborly relations between Jews at Arabs could flourish even under the rickety canopy of the political culture, they could not obliterate the manifestations of economic and class inequality (One wailer described her children’s starvation agonies.) Therefore, they could not eradicate the Jews‘ covert resentment or inspire them to trust their neighbors unreservedly (as in confusing an Arab by wailing ‘strangely’, i.e., not at a time of mourning). In this class and emotional context, Jews translated Arabs’ manifestations of dependency and appreciation into a sense of supremacy. Only after obtaining equal citizenship in Israel did the emigrants’ pendulum stop swinging. Thus, if the generosity of ‘good Arabs’ was sometimes acknowledged briefly in Yemen, today’s recollections hardly view it as an indication of kindness or fairness in exchange -relations . The redemption consciousness sees this generosity only as an indication of class inferiority. The retelling of the events is largely a reflection of a *technology of the self* (Martin et al., 1988) that is influenced mainly by the unequivocal link between identity and being redeemed.

The findings support a third explanation for the immigrant's shame, according to which wailing for Arabs blurred the boundaries between women’s lament, a secular endeavor, and men’s eulogy, a sanctified labor. This explains why the eulogizers wished to differentiate from the Arabs to the very best of their ability; this allowed them to defend their mourning rituals by confining the gender-differentiated performance to their community only. I showed elsewhere (2006) that the Jewish ritual, as other death rituals, creates a forced emphasis of differentiating views and the silencing of bridging ones. It is part of the normative process of self-differentiation to which the theoretical concept of ‘schismogenesis’ refers (Bateson, 1980). In this process, as Sarris observes (Sarris,

1995), women overperform in their weeping and their exaggeration proves to be lasting in view of the men's emotional self-restraint. The result is a circular chain reaction, in which women cry more and men restrain themselves more. The final outcome is the preservation of the male and female ethos.

The men's attitudes toward the women's' emotionality, cited above, indicate in particular that if the weeping of Yemenite-Jewish men resembles that of women in the course of a ritual, it may breach a taboo and diminish the men's reputation.

As they performed, however, the Jewish men strongly resembled wailing women by appropriating the women's language, the biographical contents of the lament, and, above all, the need to show tears. The resulting situation undermined the male ethos of Yemenite Jewry, in which only women cry (Caraveli, 1986; Sarris, 1995; Gamliel, 2006; Danforth, 1982; Urban, 1988).

It is noteworthy that both Jewish men and Jewish women in Yemen used Arabic as their daily vernacular but only Hebrew in religious rituals. Paradoxically, by performing a lament that was foreign to the sanctified duty of 'learning' men, the male wailers helped to weaken the impression of their religious status in the eyes of Jewish women, too. Given the cultural-religious male ethos in the structure of Yemen's patriarchal society (Tobi, 1999), in Israel, women's wailing evokes unwanted memories. It is wailing, and not the Hebrew-language eulogy, that evolved into a cosmology of collective shame.

With these reasons for shame in mind, one may ask why the men did not squelch women's wailing shortly after the community settled in Israel. Following the views of anthropologists who study immigrants from Arab countries in Israel, I would say that the answer lies in the challenges of immigration to the community's self-image and their implications for continuity and change (Shokeid and Deshen, 1999). The Yemenite Jews' presence in the Holy Land as a society kept at arm's length from the mainstream due to its 'Arab-ness' created clashing urges among member of

this society: the wish to reconstruct the image of the ‘Yemenite-Jewish tradition’ by stripping it of Arab elements, countered by the wish to preserve the protective community of emotion, one that numbers mourning rituals and women’s wailing among its quintessential mechanisms (Gamliel, 2010).

Even though the time has come to lament the fate of the women’s lament, the practice maintains a linkage with the immigrants’ collective self-healing. The existential melancholy that women’s wailing triggers is diffuse: it transitions from a connection with a deceased individual to the collective, from the present to the past—or, as Avigail, a second-generation immigrant in Israel, described it: ‘The wailer brings me back to roots, to primeval feelings, back in time, back to my parents’ childhood’.

In conclusion, anthropologists who bemoan the death of traditions regret the colonialist and modernistic circumstances that induced this decline (Holst-Warhaft, 1996; Sarris, 1995; Grima, 1991; Feld, 1995). As I came to appreciate the social and psychological value of women’s wailing, I felt much the same way. Influenced by feminist thinking, I even tended to believe, some of the time, that the male émigrés had exploited the community’s migration to a modern country to gag women’s wailing as part of the aggressive chauvinism that they had imported from the ‘old country’. Taken together, however, the stories quoted above yield a more complex understanding. After all, it is the young, and not the Jewish immigrants from Yemen, who protest against women’s wailing at death events. The immigrants’ passivity merely reflects their willingness to forego the practice of wailing within the framework of their canon rituals. The situational significance of this stance is that they will not bother the women if they wail and will not encourage them to wail if they do not. Only in Yemen did the community expect women to perform their work of mourning within the framework of the halakhic sanction created by the expression ‘Three days [are] for weeping’. As religious immigrants, the Yemenite Jews in Israel did not feel that they had permission to cancel the sanction. Partly for this reason, the decline of the wailing tradition in Israel

corresponded in time to the wailers' aging up to the past decade. The immigrants contemplate the influence of modernity without sadness. Unlike eulogy, which endures and is still performed, many of them perceive wailing as a powerful lachrymose mechanism that, by the very fact of its decline, reflects their modest quest for respectability (Wilce, 2009: 130).

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